

Federal agencies developing first-responder ID

Jim Zok represents MARAD on development team

— Story & photo by Thom Robinson, public affairs specialist —

One of the lessons learned by emergency planners during the September 11th tragedy, and in the aftermaths of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, was that it is often difficult if not impossible to determine the "good guys" from the bad ones based on the appearance, presentation or hand-carried credentials of a total stranger.

In a crisis, when on-scene officials cannot confirm that the people who show up for duty possess the required specialties and skills demanded by the situation, those officials in charge of the emergency response are prevented from using first responders and volunteers efficiently and effectively, which further delays delivering aid and assistance to those with immediate needs.

How does one know that the identification being displayed is legitimate and, more importantly, that the person holding that ID card is in fact who he or she claims to be?

Jim Zok, the Maritime Administration's associate administrator for financial approvals and cargo preference, can easily explain the range of identity problems facing a nationwide force of first responders when communities are in crisis.

The solution, however, is not so easy.

"Look at what happened in (Hurricane) Katrina. There were situations where doctors showed up to render medical services but were instead only allowed to drive cars because officials couldn't verify their credentials or determine who they were," said Zok.

This is one reason why Homeland Security Policy Directive 12 was issued to change all that delay and confusion by developing and establishing reliable personal identification, verification and documentation protocols for all federal employees and contractors -- literally hundreds of thousands of people. Other initiatives have also appeared to do similar things for other populations -- initiatives such as U.S. VISIT, TWIC, Registered Traveler, FAST, NEXUS, SENTRI and several others.

So how does the government get its arms around a problem this size?

Zok said the first step is to review what's already being done by agencies across federal, state and local governments -- and even across U.S. borders.

As a MARAD representative, Zok attended a recent gathering of policy planners and agency experts who met to begin mapping and analyzing the 43 different vetting systems that are currently in use by the federal community alone.

"When you look at this entire process, and the cost involved, and the number of background checks that are being done on people . . . it's just a huge amount of redundancy that (a lot of which) should be unnecessary," he said.

"For some time now, I have been on several teams that are discussing these issues, analyzing policies and working on improving things. MARAD got involved with the first-responders issue because our agency has been working with the Maritime Administrative Card, since the mid-90s. The card is fundamentally for crewmembers and workers in the maritime industry. We compared notes and found that there was a lot of similarity in what we were trying to achieve, so we began working together."

MARAD's Jim Zok conducts an inter-agency conference call from his office in Washington, D.C., on Dec. 13, 2006. Zok has been assisting a federal-policy "think tank" in developing ways to both quickly and accurately identify maritime workers and emergency responders, and to verify their professional credentials.



"We are also involved with TWIC (transportation worker identity credential)," he said. "When we started TWIC, we were looking at workers carrying 20 or 30 documents, just to be able to be onboard and do their jobs."

Fortunately lots of agencies are now sitting down and comparing processes in an attempt to reduce redundancy and speed identity verification.

The Department of Defense, which is the largest issuer of identification cards, has provided significant leadership and expertise during development of these protocols, so it is fortunate that they are bringing their experience and expertise to the table, said Zok.

Editor's note: After 36 years of service to the federal government, Jim Zok will retire from the U.S. Maritime Administration on Jan. 3, 2007. MARAD thanks him for his service to America and wishes both him and his family fair weather, good winds and good luck with future endeavors!